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RUEHCV/AMEMBASSY CARACAS 1712
RUEHPE/AMEMBASSY LIMA 1721
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SUBJECT: EDUCATION CONGRESS ENDORSES SECULAR EDUCATION

REF: LA PAZ 1795

11. (SBU) Summary: Days of contentious debate ended July 14 with the National Education Congress' endorsement of a secular education system that "respects the beliefs and spirituality of indigenous nations and the Bolivian people" and "rejects all dogmatic impositions." The Catholic Church accused delegates of ignoring the GOB's promise to respect religious education and joined other groups, including teachers and professors, in opposing the proposed reforms. Most observers have declared the congress a failure, and Minister of the Presidency Juan Ramon Quintana criticized the education minister for failing to achieve consensus. While the MAS got what it wanted on paper, Bolivian educational reform appears far from settled. End summary.

12. (U) Days of heated debate ended July 14 with the National Education Congress' endorsement of a secular education system that "respects the beliefs and spirituality of indigenous nations and the Bolivian people" and "rejects all dogmatic impositions." The role of religion (and especially of the Catholic Church) was a particularly contentious issue, but reforms calling for the "decolonization" of education (reftel) and greater emphasis on indigenous cultures and languages also generated debate. The congress endorsed the changes without full support, as 177 of its 628 delegates walked out July 10 to protest the GOB's heavy-handed management of the week-long meeting.

13. (U) The Catholic Church accused delegates of ignoring the GOB's July 13 promise to respect religious education and joined other groups, including teachers and professors, in opposing the proposed reforms. La Paz Archbishop Edmundo Abastoflor said in his July 16 homily that it would be "silly" to stop allowing Bolivians to be guided by God, and Santa Cruz Auxiliary Bishop Estanislao Powlaszewicz remarked that the GOB wanted to eliminate "not only religion, but also God" from national education. Teachers, university professors, and other groups objected to a perceived lack of representation in the congress and complained that the event was unfairly controlled by the Movement Toward Socialism (MAS) party, attacking the GOB for seeking to stifle dissent.

14. (SBU) Most observers, including Confederation of Neighborhood Committees Secretary General Benjamin Caceres,

have declared the congress a failure. Caceres told EconOff July 18 that the walk-out of key groups weakened the congress' legitimacy and would lead to new confrontations between the GOB and civil society. Minister of the Presidency Juan Ramon Quintana criticized Education Minister Felix Patzi for failing to achieve consensus and suggested the congress was "not the best venue" for debate, lamenting the withdrawal of important institutions. The GOB, he said, "would have liked to obtain better results."

15. (SBU) Comment: While the MAS got what it wanted on paper (delegates made few changes to the MAS proposal), Bolivian educational reform appears far from settled. The MAS could be taking on more than it can handle by opening an internal front against the Church, universities and urban teachers. In addition, some say the education congress is a preview of what could go wrong in the Constituent Assembly. We will continue to monitor how planned reforms will impact the American Cooperative School and work with the diplomatic community to press the GOB to moderate its position. End comment.
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